



Seattle Design Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Greg Nickels
Seattle City Council

FROM: David Spiker, Chair

DATE: July 21, 2004

RE: Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Redevelopment
Preferred Alternative

Background

The Design Commission along with the Planning Commission met in joint session in June 2004 for a presentation and discussion of the Viaduct DEIS Alternatives and to frame their individual recommendations for a preferred alternative on this important project.

The Design Commission is particularly concerned with the long-term urban design consequences of the Viaduct Redevelopment project. This massive infrastructure project will directly or indirectly affect circulation, land use, and development patterns throughout much of downtown Seattle and to the South and North, as well. For this reason, the Commission believes that the alternatives must be assessed in relation to the public benefits and opportunities each would yield, above and beyond replacing the vehicular capacity of the highway.

Alternatives Analysis

From the Design Commission's perspective, it is essential that the City/State team conduct the broadest possible analysis of options for the Viaduct's redevelopment rather than addressing transportation needs alone. Having continuously reviewed the early design alternatives for the Viaduct project, the Design Commission concludes that there is no cheap solution for the Viaduct and Seawall redevelopment. Even the recent option proposed by citizens of removing and not replacing the Viaduct (the no highway option) entails substantial costs and consequences to the City. These include seawall repair, demolition of the Viaduct structure itself and area surface street improvements to accommodate additional traffic.

The Design Commission is unanimous in its conclusion that the Rebuild and Aerial alternatives are unacceptable. They combine high costs and long-term environmental impacts, but address only transportation needs while failing to provide any additional quality of life benefits for the City. The Commission is similarly unanimous in concluding that the Surface Highway alternatives are unwise as they generate significant impacts to the fabric of the waterfront and downtown. A surface highway merely paves the water's

edge; the City's goal should be a great waterfront, not a great roadway. We are not yet convinced about a no highway alternative but believe that it might have real merit. We would encourage more detailed analysis and careful consideration of it as a 6th alternative by the project team.

Preferred Alternative

The Design Commission holds that tunnel alternatives, while the most costly, provide long-term benefits that fully compensate for their added cost. These include rebuilding the seawall and reclaiming the Central Waterfront. Preferably, the City should pursue a Full Tunnel, but the Bypass Tunnel would be an acceptable fallback if a Full Tunnel is not affordable. By putting transportation below grade, the tunnel alternatives provide additional land for other uses in the center of the city. This land can be put to strategic uses that benefit the city and afford new development opportunities. Both tunnel alternatives should be explored further and the City should pursue whichever variation allows maximum flexibility and adaptability to accommodate the City's long-term needs.

In conclusion, the City should consider the full extent of each alternative's impacts and its urban design potential. A comprehensive review of the benefits as well as the costs of each alternative should be framed, not in terms of finding the least costly solution for maintaining traffic capacity through the City, but in terms of providing the most generous set of opportunities and prospective benefits to the City, at large.

Items for Additional Consideration, Future Discussion and Follow Up

- 1) Surface treatment conditions with any alternative – As design work proceeds, the Commission would like to weigh in on this important urban design issue and advise the City on the ideal configuration of the surface conditions. The Commission urges the City to maintain flexibility for now until a Waterfront Concept Plan is developed.
- 2) Public Benefits – the City should develop a clear list of desired public benefits from the project and the Design Commission would be pleased to offer its input. As briefly discussed above, the alternative that reclaims the most land and affords the best urban design potential is the most beneficial to the City. Other public benefits might include: higher property values, reduced noise, improved environmental conditions, etc.
- 3) Waterfront/Viaduct Overlay District – the City should establish a special district to ensure local oversight with a clear role of review for the Design Commission. All projects along both the shoreline and corridor must be assessed for their design consequence to the City.

cc: Maureen Sullivan and Tom Madden, WSDOT
Grace Crunican, Bob Chandler and Steve Pearce, SDOT
Diane Sugimura and John Rahaim, DPD
Geri Beardsley and Scott MacColl, Council Central Staff
Seattle Planning Commission